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ABSTRACT

The critical components to be considered when establishing a writing center at the secondary level are facilities, staff, and operation. The term writing center is used because writing center is a more inclusive concept than writing lab, dealing not only with remedial work but also with polishing acquired skills and assisting students with particularly challenging assignments. The writing center should be as near to the "mainstream" of the school as possible to attract both students and faculty. An area of the library or media center is an excellent location. The important idea is to make the chosen location unique to writing activities. Besides the use of library tables or carrels (to make the writing center look different from regular classrooms), the only necessary materials are reference books (dictionaries, thesauri, usage guides) and student papers. There are several ways of staffing the writing center, including the use of faculty members across the curriculum, English teachers only, and a combination of faculty and trained peer tutors. The key to the success of a writing center is the individualized attention students receive: so, depending on how much space is available, students should meet individually or in small groups of less than six students. (Examples of limited-service and full-service writing centers are discussed.) (RL)

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ESTABLISHING A WRITING CENTER ON THE SECONDARY LEVEL

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ESTABLISHING A WRITING CENTER ON THE SECONDARY LEVEL

During the past several years student writing has been severely criticized. Critics (both in the field of education and the popular press) claim that standardized test scores and classroom papers reflect a decline in writing skills. Recognizing a growing need for improving these skills, many two year and four year colleges have established study skills centers, writing labs and writing centers to help students improve their writing. These centers have met with success where large classroom instruction has failed. Many students have profited from the more individualized instruction they receive in the tutorial situation which such centers offer. In spite of their increasing popularity on college campuses, writing labs and writing centers are still scarce on the secondary level. There are many reasons for this, ranging from lack of interest to lack of funds. The purpose of this paper is to suggest plans for the development of such centers.

In this paper I will be using the term "writing center" instead of "writing lab." To many people the term "writing lab" implies a place where remedial writing is improved. The term "writing center", on the other hand, is a more inclusive concept. A writing center deals not only with

writers who need remedial work, but it also helps competent writers who need to polish their skills or need advice on a particularly challenging assignment. We describe the writing center at Douglass College as "a place where writing, on any level, is practiced."

In discussing the establishment of a writing center on the secondary level, I am going to concentrate on three areas: facilities, staff, and operation.

FACILITIES

The physical facilities for establishing a writing center need not be elaborate or expensive. I have visited centers that formerly had been book rooms, storage rooms, conference rooms and sections of the library or media center. In all cases, these "rooms" have been turned into attractive, warm places where students feel comfortable to write. A little bright paint and colorful carpeting can work wonders over old cinderblock walls and cement floors.

If at all possible, I recommend placing the writing center as near the "mainstream" of the school as possible. If it is located in an out-of-the-way corner of the building, it is less likely to attract students and faculty. Part of the library or media center is an excellent location for several reasons: first, the students are used to going there for help and support; second, they may need reference materials for some of the papers they are writing; and third, students

of varying levels of writing ability use the library or media center regularly, again countering the "remedial" stigma.

If there is not a section of the library or an adjacent room which can be set aside, a "writing table" can be used. All that is needed is a conference or traditional library table which is designated for use in writing practice.

I do not recommend placing the writing center in a regular classroom unless that classroom can be used exclusively as a writing center. If the room is used for regular classes part of the day, it detracts from the "uniqueness" of the writing place, and materials and equipment can be misplaced or broken. If there is, however, a classroom which can be set aside and converted into a writing center exclusively, this is often successful because the room is usually large and well lighted.

There is equipment that can help turn any of these areas into a writing center. On the most basic level all that is needed are desks and chairs. Traditional student desks, however, make the center appear as a classroom. If possible, writing tables or carrels are preferred to desks. Desks which can be rearranged into tables or groups are also acceptable. The goal is to make the writing center look different from a traditional classroom, because it is different! Tables or carrels with separate chairs are more conducive to the conference technique which is used in tutoring.

Special texts and materials are not needed: the students' papers are the text. If reference books are needed, the English classroom texts can be used. The tutors in the writing center may, over a period of time, develop individualized writing exercises which they find useful. These exercises can be kept on file to share with other tutors.

A dictionary, thesaurus and perhaps other usage guides should, of course, be nearby.

Aside from these basics, everything else is optional: bookcases, storage closets, a faculty desk, filing cabinets, bulletin boards, posters and chalk boards. The writing center can become a resource room on writing and writing across the curriculum. Books and journals on the composing process and the teaching of English can be located here.

STAFF

There are several ways of staffing a writing center, depending on the funds and personnel available. One way the writing center can be staffed is to use faculty members from all disciplines. When the writing center is staffed by faculty members across the curriculum, it becomes a place where students come to get help with a variety of writing assignments.

Another means of staffing a writing center is to use only English teachers. I have visited a school where this has been

successfully done as part of the regular English curriculum.

A third way to staff a writing center is to use a combination of faculty members and trained peer tutors. Much has been written lately on peer evaluation and peer tutoring on the college level. I see no reason why successful high school students can not also be trained to be peer tutors.

Whether faculty members come from all disciplines or from the English department, each teacher may be assigned to the writing center one period or more a day. These periods in the writing center can be in lieu of a duty period, such as study hall or hall patrol, or they may take the place of a class period. In either case, it does not have to be an "extra assignment" for the teacher.

Peer tutors can report to the writing center during study hall as an extra activity or they can do it on a regular basis and receive credit hours for their work. Peer tutoring can also be part of an independent study project in English since peer tutoring helps the tutors improve their own writing skills as they help others.

Both faculty and peer tutors can be trained in tutoring techniques in a series of workshops or after-school meetings. The main thing is for them to learn how to provide an "audience" for the writer; they should learn how and when to make helpful comments on the writing, but they should never write for the student. Tutors (peer and faculty) are trained in

the writing process and learn to help students at every stage of the process.

Whether the writing center uses faculty or faculty and peer tutors, there should be one person who co-ordinates and oversees the program. This is very important. The position of writing center co-ordinator or director need not be a full-time job, but one person needs to insure the continuity of the program and to be responsible for staffing the center and offering help to the tutors. This position could be filled by a faculty member, department chairperson, or administrator. In an ideal situation, this would be a full-time job and the co-ordinator would also be a tutor and tutor-trainer.

OPERATION

The key to the success of a writing center is the individualized attention students receive. Depending on the space available, students may meet individually or in small groups, but in either case they are receiving more personal attention than in a large classroom setting. A word about small groups -- small groups must be small. At Douglass College we limit our groups to four students; certainly when the group is larger than six a tutorial setting no longer exists.

TWO EXAMPLES

I am going to describe the operations of two different types of writing centers: the limited-service writing center

and the full-service writing center. Both types of writing centers can operate on an appointment or drop-in basis.

The Limited Service Writing Center

There are several ways a limited service writing center can be put into operation. One way is to run it through and for the English department. In this case, the students are tutored only by English department members or peer tutors, and they are tutored only on assignments for their English classes.

For example, I know of a secondary school which has a limited service writing center for students in all 11th grade and 12th grade writing classes. As part of their English course requirements, students report to the writing center (a converted book storage closet) three times each marking period in order to meet on a tutorial basis with their English classroom teacher. A marking period is approximately ten weeks. They do this by making an appointment with their English teacher. These conference meetings are working, according to the English chairman, but he would like to expand the program.

Another limited-service writing center uses faculty members from all disciplines as tutors, and the students meet with them by appointment. Again, these students are receiving individualized help and audience reaction to their papers. The advantage to this second type of program is that students can bring papers from any subject to work on with the tutors.

An extended version of this type of center has a drop-in service as well. A drop-in service means that the writing center is open during certain periods of the day, and students are free to drop in for help. They may take advantage of the drop-in service during their free periods, study hall periods or lunch time. They may also use the center during class time with the written permission of the instructor.

If a writing center operates on a drop-in basis, a schedule must be clearly posted which indicates what periods drop-in services are available and who is tutoring at those times. Again, this is one example of the necessity for a writing center co-ordinator.

Most of the limited service writing centers concentrate on helping students with a particular writing assignment. They come when they need help with one paper and need not return. A full-service writing center, on the other hand, can offer drop-in help as well as developmental programs.

The Full-Service Writing Center

A full-service writing center can be a resource center on writing for students and faculty. Among the services it can offer are tutorials for students with specific problems for a paper; diagnostic testing; small-group instruction; mini courses on term paper strategies, developmental writing, creative writing, expository writing, scientific writing and business writing. In addition, a full-service writing

center can help faculty members with editing and improving their writing.

Such centers are open every period of the school day and usually have at least one full-time staff member to coordinate scheduling, tutoring and staffing. Students may come voluntarily or as a result of a course requirement. In some schools attendance at the writing center is required for students who need remedial instruction but is optional for students who come for self-improvement. In either case, the writing center can meet the needs of students at every level of writing ability. A student may come for developmental work on organizing a paragraph or for advice on how to publish a poem.

Whether a school chooses to establish a limited service or full-service writing center depends, of course, on a number of factors. If you are planning to establish a writing center, it is good to visit other schools and study other plans, but remember that each school is unique and it is not always possible to adopt a model that has been successful in another school. You must keep your students and faculty in mind when developing your own writing center and tailor it to your own needs and resources.

Although it takes some planning to establish a writing center in the secondary school, the benefits are well worth

the effort. Faculty as well as students will profit from the increased awareness of the writing process as they become more aware of their own writing.

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